An Evaluation of the Events of August 16–19, 1953 (25–28 Mordad 1332) from the Perspective of the Constitutional Law of Iran

Many Iranians and non-Iranians interested in Iran's modern history have repeatedly heard about the events of August 16–19, 1953, commonly referred to as the “August 19 Coup.” A dominant narrative, reinforced by various forms of documentation, has attempted to frame these events under that label and accustom public perception accordingly. But is this designation accurate and factual—or fabricated and emotional?

To properly understand and assess the use of the term “coup,” it is necessary to examine the etymology, scientific meaning, and legal implications of the word.

The term “Coup d'État” is originally French and generally refers to the overthrow of a legally established government by subordinate military forces.

In other words, a coup has meaning and legitimacy as a concept only when:
1. It is carried out by military personnel (with or without the cooperation of politicians), and
2. It is executed by mid- or lower-level military actors—not by top-level officials or sovereign authorities.

In Volume 4 of his Legal Terminology (2002 edition, page 3059, entry 11450), Mohammad Jafar Langaroudi, a prominent Iranian legal scholar, defines a coup from a legal perspective as follows:
“A coup means seizing political power through unconstitutional means, usually involving the use of armed force.”

This gives us a reasonably clear picture of the defining features and criteria of a coup.

At the same time, we must also understand the concept of a counter-coup. A counter-coup refers to actions taken to confront a military or political coup (involving military actors) and restore legal and constitutional order.

The story begins when Mohammad Reza Shah grew dissatisfied with Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, believing that his leadership had caused economic and political decline and had pushed the country into crisis. From the Shah’s perspective, Mossadegh’s continued leadership was detrimental to national interests.

Following a long period of tension between the Shah and the Prime Minister—and after Mossadegh's controversial move to dissolve the Parliament (Majles) on August 14, 1953 (23 Mordad 1332)—the Shah decided, based on the powers granted to him under the 1906 Constitution, to dismiss Mossadegh and appoint Fazlollah Zahedi as Prime Minister. This was not without precedent: similar acts had occurred under the Qajar dynasty (e.g., dismissals of Mohammad Vali Khan Tonekaboni, Mostowfi ol-Mamalek, Ahmad Qavam), during Reza Shah's reign (e.g., Firouz, Jam, and Hossein Ala), and even later (e.g., the dismissals of Amouzegar and Hoveyda).

Now, setting aside personal or political bias, let us examine two main legal questions from the perspective of the 1906 Constitutional Law:
1. Did Mossadegh have the legal authority to dissolve the Majles?
2. Was the Shah's dismissal of Mossadegh constitutionally valid?

1. Dissolution of Parliament by Mossadegh: Legal or Not?
The Prime Minister did not have the legal authority to dissolve the Majles under any provision of the 1906 Constitution or its Supplement. In contrast, some constitutional interpretations—based on Articles 27 and 49 (with Article 27 specifying that the Shah can enact laws, including dissolving Parliament), and the implied meaning of Article 54—suggest that the Shah may have had the authority to dissolve the Majles under exceptional circumstances.
Therefore, Mossadegh's dissolution of the Majles via a referendum was a direct violation of the Constitutional Law.

2. Did the Shah Have the Constitutional Right to Dismiss the Prime Minister?
According to the explicit text and implications of Articles 27, 45, 46, and 49, the Shah not only had the right but also the duty to dismiss the Prime Minister when deemed necessary.
- Article 46: "Appointment and dismissal of ministers is within the authority of the King." The term "minister" includes the Prime Minister.
- Moreover, the Constitution does not even explicitly mention the office of "Prime Minister", treating all ministers under the same legal category.
- Article 49: "The issuance of orders and decrees for the enforcement of laws is a right of the King, and they must not be delayed or suspended."
Thus, Mossadegh's refusal to obey the Shah's dismissal order under Article 46, and his continued hold on power in defiance of the Constitution, constituted a clear violation of constitutional law.

Use of Force: Coup or Counter-Coup?
Following the issuance of the dismissal order, Mossadegh not only refused to step down, but his loyal military forces:
- Arrested Colonel Nematollah Nassiri (head of the Imperial Guard and

bearer of the dismissal order),
- Transferred him to Eshratabad Barracks, and
- Arrested General Batmanghelidj (Chief of Staff), Colonel Zand Karimi, Colonel Azmoudeh, and 14 members of the Imperial Guard—all of which were carried out by military officers loyal to Mossadegh, including Colonel Mobasheri, Secretary of the Military Organization of the Tudeh Party.
These acts were the true initiation of the coup.
In fact, coup plotters even attempted to arrest the Shah himself at his summer villa in Kelardasht. Thanks to General Khademi, the Shah escaped to Ramsar and then to Baghdad.

What Happened on August 19?
On August 19, 1953, pro-Shah military forces, along with segments of the general public opposed to communism and supportive of the monarchy, took to the streets.
They successfully overturned Mossadegh's unconstitutional seizure of power, effectively staging a counter-coup that reinstated the Shah and enabled the enforcement of his dismissal order. Fazlollah Zahedi was formally appointed as the new Prime Minister.

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